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What Churches Can Do To Understand and Help Prevent Teen Suicide

Our churches celebrate life, death, and resurrection, but may meet one of their greatest challenges in helping to prevent the unnecessary death of young people through suicide. A majority of young people think that most (27%) or at least some (35%) people of their own age have thought about committing suicide. Among the remaining teens interviewed, 23% feel only a few members of their generation have thought about it, and 15% think virtually none have contemplated suicide. On a more personal level, six teens in 10 (60%) say they know someone who has tried to commit suicide.

One in three of those who were known to have attempted suicide were judged by the teens who knew them to have been very (4%) or somewhat (30%) "religious." The others were felt to have been not very (41%) or not at all (23%) religious.

As for themselves, slightly over half (52%) of the teens reported that they have discussed the topic of suicide with friends or others. About one in three (35%) took the further step of talking or thinking about committing suicide. Fifteen percent said they came close to attempting suicide at some point, and 6% actually made an attempt at taking their own lives. The reasons that they were still alive to talk about their survival are diverse, but most center upon an affirmation of life; e.g., "Nothing is worth killing yourself for," "things will get better," or "life is important."

Drug and alcohol abuse head the list of reasons that young people feel can lead teens to consider suicide. Drug abuse is singled out as the most important cause by one teen in five.

Parental difficulties, problems in growing up, and peer pressures receive prominent mention as potential causes of suicidal behavior. The problems of growing up are most frequently mentioned as the leading cause (22%).

Satanic cults, the morbid attire and lyrics of "heavy metal" rock groups, and the gloom and doom of playing the game of "Dungeons and Dragons," are all named as potential contributing causes of teen suicide. Comparatively few young people, however, believe any of these are a leading cause.

Also playing a role are such diverse factors as economic woes, teen-age pregnancy, AIDS, gangs, and school problems. Four teens in 10 mention suicidal thoughts can be triggered by others who have talked about it or have done it.

Role of the Church

Nearly half of the teens (47%) suggest that if a friend were considering suicide, a member of the clergy would be someone from whom they should seek help.

Only 28% report, however, that the churches and synagogues of their community are now doing anything to prevent teen suicide. By comparison, 41% say the local schools are doing something about the problem, and 21% say actions are being taken by their local community.

Half of those who say the churches are doing something about teen suicide report their role is to offer activities or spiritual alternatives to acts of self-destruction. More directly, they say that churches are discussing the problem with teens, offering counseling services and support groups, and conducting meetings and awareness sessions on the issue. Those who do not currently have these activites generally would like to see the local churches institute them.

Asked specifically about facilities that churches could offer, teens strongly endorse drop-in centers, counseling services, alternative activites, family counseling, and "hot-line" services.

The findings are from a special survey on teen-age suicide conducted by the Gallup Organization for the George H. Gallup International Institute, and are based on combined telephone and mail survey interviews with a representative national cross section of 1,152 teen-agers, 13 through 19, conducted during the period of November 1990 to January 1991.

The illuminated capital letters in this month's issue were created in the U.S. in the early 20th century. The style is called "Acorn."

Opinion of Causes of Teen Suicide

Which of the following reasons (shown below) do you think causes teen-agers to think about committing suicide? Of the possible reasons which is the major or number one reason?

	Causes	Most important cause
Drug abuse	88%	20%
Trouble with parents	86	14
Problems in growing up	83	22
Peer pressures	83	16
Satanic cults	71	17
Alcohol abuse	68	3
School problems	65	3
Teen-age pregnancy	64	3
AIDS	44	3
Gangs	44	3
Other teens talking about or committing suicide	40	1
Economic problems	36	1
Heavy metal music	35	1
Career uncertainties	21	*
Unemployment	19	*
Playing Dungeons & Dragons	15	*
Financing college	12	*
Other	8	4
Don't know	*	2

*Less than one-half of 1 percent.

What Activities Should Churches and Communities Offer to Prevent Teen Suicide?

To prevent teen-agers from considering suicide, should the community (religious organizations) offer:

Community	Churches
Drop-in centers	84%	88%
Counseling	83	89
Alternative activities	82	83
Family counseling	79	80
Hot line	77	92
Counselor training	56	62
Teen shelter	50	64

What Are the Churches Doing?

What are they doing?
What should they do?

	Now[1] doing	Should[2] be doing
Discuss, talk about it	20%	16%
Offer counseling	20	17
Support groups	12	8
Programs, seminars meetings	11	12
Awareness, education, classes	11	7
Be supportive, offer help	3	3
Hot lines	--	5
Shelters	--	4
Offer activities, spiritual alternatives	51	38

[1]Based on those who say churches are now doing something to help.

[2]Based on those who say churches are not doing anything or who "don't know."

How Religious Was Person Who Attempted Suicide?

Did this person appear to be religious?

Very	4%
Somewhat	30
Not very	41
Not at all	23
Don't know	2

Who is Helping Teens to Avoid Suicide?

Is your school doing anything to help teen-agers so they don't consider suicide? So far as you know, is your community (the churches and synagogues) doing anything to prevent teen-agers from considering suicide?

Schools	41%
Churches and synagogues	28
Community	21

The Religious Life of Young Americans

The resources of the George H. Gallup International Institute, the Gallup Youth Survey, the Gallup Organization, and the Princeton Religion Research Center are combined into a new and valuable publication, The Religious Life of Young Americans.

Topics explored in detail include the use and knowledge of the Bible, interest in cults, the appeal of the New Age movement, church membership and attendance.

Publication is planned for Fall 1991. The pre-publication price is $29.95. For more information contact Marie Swirksy, 609-921-6200.

Teens Say Religion Has Little Influence on Their Generation

There may have once been a time when young people drew their inspiration from the ideas of religious leaders or great books, but this is no longer true according to many of the nation's teens. Friends, home, school, music and television all are rated ahead of religion and books as factors teens believe are having the greatest influence upon their generation.

Only 13% of the teens interviewed feel that religion has a great deal of influence and an additional 30% say it has some influence. Disagreeing are a majority of teens, with 28% saying religion has little influence, and another 28% feeling it has very little influence.

Protestant teens (14%) are twice as likely as young Catholics (6%) to believe religion is exerting a great deal of influence upon their generation.

Books earn even less credit, with just 3 percent of the teens saying they believe books have a great deal of influence. "Peer pressure" is the leading factor, named by 87%. High ratings for having a great deal of influence are also given to the home (51%) and school (45%).

Social and religious critics who are concerned about the disproportionate influence of modern music and television upon the younger generation may have good cause to worry. Music is believed to have a great deal of influence by 41% of the teens, and television by 32%. Only 9% of the teens feel that publications have a great deal of influence.

Books and magazines are not the only media to suffer, as only 19 percent of the teens feel that the movies are having a great influenc upon them.

The findings are based on combined telephone and mail survey interviews with a representative national cross section of 1,152 teen-agers, 13 through 19, conducted during the period of November 1990 to January 1991 for the George H. Gallup International Institute.

How Much Influence on Teens?

Do you feel today's teen-agers are influenced a great deal, some, a little, or very little by (the factors listed below)?

	Great deal	Some	Little	Very little
Friends	87%	11%	1%	1%
Home	51	31	14	4
School	45	36	14	5
Music	41	35	17	1
Television	32	43	18	7
Movies	19	48	22	11
Religion	13	30	28	28
Magazines	9	41	32	17
Books	3	23	41	32

No opinion (1%) omitted from some ratings.

Advertisement

Start the 1990s with These Valuable Studies

The Role of the Bible in American Society by George Gallup, Jr. and Robert Bezilla provides a comprehensive overview of attitudes towards the Bible and trends on Bible reading and knowledge of the Scriptures. Cost per copy is $9.95.

Religion in America 1990 - Annual report on the key measures on religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices, and predictions for the 1990s. Cost per copy is $30.

The Unchurched American - 10 Years Later - An important update on the factors that cause people to leave the church, and those that cause them to return. Cost per copy is $29.

100 Questions and Answers by George Gallup, Jr. and Sarah Jones. A single-volume comprendium of the 100 most important questions we have surveyed in the area of religion. A handy reference tool in book size format that categorizes and analyzes key survey data. Price per copy is $30.

Emerging Trends - Commentary on surveys on religious beliefs and practices; 10 issues a year; annual subscription is $35 domestic, $45 foreign. Renew your subscription now while pre-postal rate hike rates are still in effect!

All prices include postage and handling. If you would like to receive more information about these publications, contact the Princeton Religion Research Center, 100 Palmer Square, Suite 213M, Princeton NJ 08542. Telephone (609) 921-8112.

Review Essay
The Varieties of Prayer

Considering how pervasive prayer is in the human experience, it is remarkable how very little empirical research has been done on the subject. Indeed, in contrast to many studies that have been conducted by social scientists on such topics as mystical experiences induced by hallucinogenic drugs or "speaking in tongues," the number of studies conducted on the basic act of praying is ludicrously small. Studies on the impact of prayer are even rarer.

In part this may stem from the attitude of social scientists that prayer is an act of faith, not measurable by objective means; that is, "not falsifiable" according to the standards set by Edward Popper that if a phenomenon cannot be disproven, it is not a suitable subject for scientific inquiry.

There probably would be little argument with this premise. One of the most amusing attempts at scientific measurment of the efficacy of prayer, for example, was made and reported by Francis Galton in 1872. He compared the life expectancy of the royal family in England to that of other affluent Britishers, and found it to be lower than average. He concluded from this that petitionary prayers, most frequently given in the United Kingdom on behalf of royalty, clearly had no demonstrable impact upon their longevity!

The few formal inquiries that have been made into praying behavior generally have been confined to very small samples of college students or members of cloistered religious order members, and are not projectible to the general populace.

Gallup studies have been about the only surveys taken on the subject of prayer among representative national samples of adults. The results have shown over the past 40 years that about nine Americans in 10 pray at one time or another. This overall figure has been constant, but the frequency of prayer seems more variable. Those saying prayers twice or more times a day dropped from 42% in 1952 to 27% in 1978, but rose again to 31% in more recent times. To some extent the overall decline in how often prayers are said may be a function of a drop in frequency in recent years of saying grace before meals.

A new book, **The Varieties of Prayer**, by Margaret M. Poloma, Professor of Sociology at the University of Akron, and George Gallup, Jr., moves beyond these basic figures and reports upon a more comprehensive survey conducted on praying behavior and experiences that was conducted by Gallup in cooperation with the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Religious Research Association in 1988.

The study found that 88% of adults say they "ever pray to God." The kinds of prayers they reported are divided into four basic types:

- 84% are engaged in **conversational prayer** in which they talk with God in their own words, thank him for his blessings, ask for forgiveness of sins, or ask him for his blessings.
- 52% practice **meditative prayer** by quietly thinking about God, trying to listen to God speak to them, spending time worshipping and adoring God, or just "feeling" the presence of God
- **Petitionary prayer** is practiced by 42% of adults, who pray to God to ask him for material things they may need.
- **Ritual praying**, consisting of reading from a book of prayers and reciting memorized prayers, is practiced by 19% of the adults.

The figures reported above are those who have been engaged in all of the listed practices for each of the four basic categories. The actual incidence for individual practices is generally higher, e.g., a remarkable 96% of adults who pray say they thank God for his blessings; 50% recite prayers they have memorized.

Of even greater interest are the findings of what people experience when they pray. In response to a list of suggested experiences, here is what people who pray say happens to them:

- 88% experience a deep sense of peace and well-being.
- 79% have felt a strong presence of God.
- 73% at least once received what they regarded as a definite answer to a specific prayer or request.
- 61% received what they believed to be a deeper insight into a spiritual or Biblical truth.
- 57% felt divinely inspired or "led by God" to perform some specific action.

Those are only the basic unidimensional findings for the survey responses. The book itself goes into far greater detail and rigorous statistical analysis to demonstrate which types of prayers are most prevalent among various sectors of the population according to both their demographic characteristics and their overall religious beliefs and practices. This is done within the framework of extensive quotation and analysis of the writings of social science and theological writers on the subject of prayer, ranging from William Jones and Gordon Allport to Søren Kierkegaard and Thomas Merton.

The book is being published in July 1991 by Trinity Press International. It is 160 pages in length, including statistical tables and references.

--Robert Bezilla

Brits Losing Confidence in the Church

LONDON--A March 1991 study by Social Surveys (Gallup) Ltd. found that only about one Britisher in three has a "great deal" (11%) or "quite a bit" (25%) of confidence in the church. This represents a seven percentage-point drop since 1989 when 43% expressed confidence.

By comparison, in the most recent Gallup Poll, 56% of Americans said they had a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the church.

In both countries, however, the military is at the top of the list. The British attitudes towards their armed forces are particularly high, but it should be remembered that the survey was conducted very shortly after the conclusion of the spectacular military successes of Operation Desert Storm.

Here is a comparison of the two English-speaking countries' attitudes towards their institutions.

(U.K.) Please look at this card and tell me for each item listed how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal, quite a lot, not very much or none at all?
(U.S.) I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one: a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little.

	U.K.	U.S.
Armed forces	91%	68%
Major corporations	47	25
Parliament/Congress	47	24
Courts	41	47
Church	36	56
Schools	33	45
Unions	28	27
The Press	17	39

Many Objected to the Suppression of Religious Symbols in Saudi Arabia

NEW YORK--The war in Iraq created an uneasy alliance between the U.S. and Muslim states in their opposition to Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait. In particular, the presence of American troops in such great numbers in the religiously conservative nation of Saudi Arabia presented conditions that many feared could offend Arab and Muslim sensibilites, and that these could be exploited by Iraq's propagandists to drive a wedge between the Judeo-Christian forces and the Muslim forces facing them. To prevent this from happening, U.S. military leaders imposed rules upon the armed forces under their command to modify their behavior so as not to offend their Muslim hosts.

In a nationwide telephone survey conducted among a representative sample of 1,348 adults by the CBS/ New York Times Poll in early January, many Americans felt that it was right to ban the use of alcoholic beverages by the U.S. armed forces while serving in Saudi Arabia. They were divided in opinion on whether women should be kept away from driving vehicles or working with Saudi soldiers. A clear majority, however, believed the U.S. military went too far in the suppressing the display of Christian and Jewish symbols in public. Only about one person in four supported the ban on symbols.

American armed forces have changed some of their ordinary behavior in order not to offend the strict Muslim cultural traditions in Saudi Arabia. Do you think we are doing the right things or are we going too far...

	Did Right thing	Went too far	Not Sure
Forbidding the use of beer, wine and other alcoholic beverages by soldiers?	63%	29%	8%
Keeping American women soldiers from driving military vehicles off base or working with the Saudi soldiers?	45	44	11
Banning the display of Christian and Jewish religious symbols by soldiers in public?	27	63	10

Role of Small Groups in Spiritual Development is the Focus of Major Study

Small groups and their role in spiritual development may be the focus of a major study by the George H. Gallup International Institute. Principal investigator for the study will be Robert Wuthnow, Professor of Sociolgy at Princeton University. Past studies by The Gallup Institute have shown that participation in small groups is both widespread and frequently important to religious development.

About three adults in 10 (29%) say they belong to a small group that meets regularly and provides support for its participants. Contrary to the image that groups are fads, the majority of participants (60%) report that they have been involved in the activity for three or more years.

A majority of people from all major faiths report the group is an integral part of the activities of their church. Most current members of small support groups say their faith or spirituality has been influenced by their involvement, and nearly all say the experience has deepened their faith. Better than eight in 10 report their group has enabled them to feel better about themselves, be more open and honest with themselves, be better able to forgive others, and to serve people outside the group.

The overall objective of the study is to obtain a better understanding of this powerful force in our society and the ways it can transform individuals to acheive both self-realization and service to others.

EMERGING TRENDS is published monthly except July and August by the PRINCETON RELIGION RESEARCH CENTER. The Center, founded in 1977, is an inter-faith non-denominational research organization with headquarters in Princeton, New Jersey. The PRRC specializes in creative actionable research, utilizing the world-wide attitudinal and behavioral facilities of Gallup International. The purpose of the PRRC is to gain a better understanding of the nature and depth of religious commitment in the United States and abroad and to explore ways this information can enable religious leaders to promote spiritual growth. A one-year subscription can be obtained for $35.00. Inquire: **Publications Department, P.O. Box 389, 100 Palmer Square, Princeton, New Jersey 08542 (Telephone 609/921-8112). PLEASE NOTIFY US OF ADDRESS CHANGE.**

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